

NATIONAL UNITARIAN PULPIT

The Danger of Preaching From the Bible

A sermon by the
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All Souls' Church (Unitarian)
Washington, D. C.

SUNDAY, MAY 12, 1951

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Printed for
THE PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE
All Souls' Church (Unitarian)
Sixteenth and Harvard Streets N.W.
Washington 9, D. C.
W. A. Wheeler Chairman

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(Printed in cooperation with the
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THE DANGER OF PREACHING FROM THE BIBLE

*"Is not my word like as fire? saith
the Lord; and like a hammer that
breaketh the rock in pieces?"*

Jeremiah xxiii, 29

Sunday sermons are a comparatively recent invention. For the greater part of the Christian era, the churches—except on special occasions—got along without them. Jesus had preached, and so had the apostles, but theirs was a missionary activity; it seemed better to the hierarchy, once the Faith was well established, not to encourage this kind of utterance. Only with the coming of the Protestant Reformation did preaching acquire its present place in the regular Sunday Service.

Even so, it was a new kind of preaching. The Old Testament prophets had preached, but the Protestant clergy were seldom interested in their example. Some of the Greek philosophers had also preached; the word *homily*, which means 'sermon,' is derived from the Athens of that period. But the Protestant clergy were not interested in this, either. Nor did they preach as Jesus and the first apostles did; to them,

preaching was exposition of the doctrine of Salvation, which they contended was taken from the Bible.

They were only partly right. Its most important source was Protestant dogma. Biblical texts were twisted and distorted until they seemed to give support to what we now describe as fundamentalist theology. Everything, Old Testament and New, was forced to fit within the pattern. Even the collection of love lyrics known as the Song of Songs (or "The Song of Solomon") was presented as a dialogue between Christ and his Church.

The Catholics had said that only the Church (i.e., the hierarchy) could interpret the Scriptures, and that the Church's interpretation was authoritative and final. The Protestants declared that this was false: that the Bible itself was the ultimate authority. Nevertheless, what they really meant was their own interpretation.

They could hardly have meant otherwise, because the Bible is not a treatise; it is a library, the books of which were written over a period of about a thousand years. To make this literature appear consistent, it was necessary to impose upon it a rigid pattern, requiring that everything contained within its sixty-six books transmit a special and manipulated meaning. The Protestant treatment of the Bible, therefore, just as much as the Catholic, was highly artificial and dogmatic. Not many Protes-

tant preachers were really scholars, any more than the Catholics had been before them. They even forgot that the Bible was not written in their own language. Of its derivation and authentic literary history they knew virtually nothing. Yet, they did at times preach powerful sermons.

After a while, the Protestant congregations—who knew no more of the background of the Bible than their preachers did—became accustomed to these sermons. Without stopping to question they took for granted that an exposition of a Bible text, so long as it accorded with dogmatic preconceptions, was a proper sermon, and that anything else was inappropriate. Then, later, when the dogmas began to be discredited, they felt that a sermon should still stay close to the Bible but without being theological and without offending their intelligence. They wanted consoling sermons, sentimental sermons, poetic sermons, picturesque sermons, inspiring sermons, nostalgic sermons, none of them dogmatic but all of them derived from the Bible.

It is quite possible to provide these sermons; they can be composed upon a similar basis to the earlier ones: the fundamentalist, dogmatic sermons which owed their substance less to the Bible than to the catechism. In other words, what you do in either case is superimpose upon the Scriptures a particular pattern of anticipation,

a particular set of preconceptions. They can be, as I have said, consoling preconceptions; or they may be whimsical preconceptions, or gently admonishing preconceptions, or almost any sort of preconceptions which are accepted as conventional. But whatever they are, they belong in the same category with the 'fire-and-brimstone' preconceptions, or the 'soon-I'll-be-in-heaven' preconceptions, or any others that are known to Christian history. As authentic expositions of the Bible, they are frauds.

That is what should be understood by the people—the modern-minded people—who think they would like to hear some sermons derived from the Bible. What they want—except in rare cases—are sermons that accord with preconceptions. Of the Bible itself they know almost nothing. If they did, they would beg the preacher under all circumstances to keep it out of his pulpit. Sermons preached from the Bible, especially the more important parts of it, would be so drastic, so radical, so specific, so painfully explicit, that few congregations would be able to endure them.

When someone occasionally says to me, "How I wish you would leave other things alone and just preach from the Bible," I am swept through with compassion. How little they realize what fearsome things they are calling down upon themselves, what an awful ordeal they are inviting!

If I tell them this, they will reply, of

course, that I am misconstruing what they mean: that what they want from the Bible is sermons on *personal* matters, not on public affairs. They are not interested in what Jeremiah said about the government of Judah; what they would like, they say, is more of the Sermon on the Mount, more of the teaching of Jesus.

One wonders if they have ever read the Sermon on the Mount! Let me quote some of it. "If . . . thou are offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." In other words, when you come to church, if you remember that you have injured anybody, or neglected anybody, or given anybody cause to resent you—and that means anybody whatever because, according to Jesus, all men are your brothers—why, leave your contribution with one of the ushers, go right out and see the individual you have wronged and make amends for your wrongdoing. Then, if there's time, come back and hear the end of the sermon. Suppose I preached a sermon on that and insisted upon the congregation applying it!

"Well," someone may say, "at least the race question would be left out of the sermon." Not in the least! It would be brought in so emphatically that the entire congregation might have to leave in a

body—to make amends for the unrighteousness, both individual and collective, that stood in the way of our worship. Does anybody suppose that Jesus would have closed his eyes to the slums of Washington? Or that he would have indulged us in not doing anything to remove them? Again I say: the entire congregation would have to leave, led no doubt by the minister.

For listen! "Except your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of God." Or in modern words, "Unless you do better than most church-going people, religion is something you just don't have."

That, you see, is preaching from the Bible! Indeed, it is scarcely exposition at all: it is letting the Bible speak for itself. Would we like some more of it? Still from the Sermon on the Mount:

"Swear not at all. Let your speech be yes and no. Whatever is more than this is evil." How would you like, dear friends, to go through the rest of this one day, saying yes and no? Speaking, that is, the truth and nothing but the truth? No adroitness, no clever turn of words, concealing what you want to hide; no hesitation and changing of the subject, no putting of things "in their best light"; no, and not a single word of extra emphasis, no swearing of any kind, whether with curse-words or with substitutes. Just 'yes' and 'no.' How many of you could do that and even get

through the coffee-hour? But then, there it is! Preaching from the Bible!

Yes, and not on public affairs! On personal life! How many of us, being smitten on one cheek, are ready to turn the other? How much are we loving our enemies? And praying for those who persecute us? How many of us are determined not to "lay up for ourselves treasure on the earth?" Some of us, it is true, are not doing very well at it, but have we given up hoping? How many of us, before offering to extract the mote from someone else's eye, have considered the beam in our own? How many of us have given up judging our neighbors? Or almost anything else in the Sermon on the Mount?

And, of course, the Sermon on the Mount is only a part of the teaching of Jesus!

One reason, beyond a doubt, why typical Christian preaching has turned away from what is *in* the Bible to conventional ways of *using* the Bible is that the content of the Bible is unbearably explicit; yes, and frequently intolerably personal. Really and truly to preach from the Bible could subject a congregation to an experience it might not survive.

"Ah," but someone says, "you could find other parts of the Bible, very uplifting and much more relaxing." And so I could, providing I were willing to defy what the Bible demands. Because here it is: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and its right-

eousness!" And a hundred other passages, carrying the same emphasis. The Bible does not allow you to treat it trivially. It insists upon first things coming first. Otherwise, it warns you, you may sin the sin which is not forgiven. The sin which blots out distinctions between good and evil, beguiling the conscience and putting it to sleep.

This much we can say, then, just as the merest preface—not even an introduction—about the Bible and personal life. And it is only the beginning of the matter!

But we must turn, now, to the Bible and public affairs. There are those, I know, who believe that the Bible is little concerned with public affairs. They are much mistaken. In the first place, if the distinction is a valid one, the Bible has greater wordage on public affairs than it has on anything else whatever. But in the second place, the Bible does not acknowledge this distinction. When treating of the one, it implies the other—the personal in the public and the public in the personal.

Let us take the Old Testament. It rises to its greatest heights in the Books of the Prophets. This, I think, is not disputed. And without exception, the prophets concern themselves with public affairs. The first of them, chronologically, was Amos, the herdsman of Tekoa. He left his cattle-tending and proceeded to the capital city to expose the corruption of the government and the decadence of the ruling class. He

told the ladies at one of the exclusive clubs that they reminded him of the cows he had been tending: well-fed, mouths constantly moving, vacant-looking in the eyes and undoubtedly stupid (Amos iv, 1). I do not approve of his having done this: it was neither kind nor chivalrous. But there it is: the sort of preaching you get in the Bible!

He told the clergy that they had lost their souls and were up to their ears in superstition. What God wants, he said, is not ritual worship and petty piety. But "let judgment roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream!" Then, he went on to tell the members of the government that they were on their last legs. Presently, the land would be invaded and its mighty ones would be cut into pieces so small that they would have to be picked up with fish-hooks. And all this, said Amos, because it had been forgotten that public policy must be based upon righteous principles. You cannot do wrong and expect things to turn out right. You are profiteers and grafters, he said, greedy and corrupt men, grinding down the poor in their poverty, utterly callous to human need. Therefore, the Lord God has condemned you. You are nearly through.

Well, what happened to Amos? After a while—you will not be surprised to hear this—it was urged upon him that he ought to be heard in other places: places that

needed his preaching much worse than did Samaria. Which, of course, is what was always happening to these Old Testament prophets—this and worse. And yet, modern preachers are requested to preach from the Bible! Is it fair, is it considerate to expect them to take that kind of risk?

Of course, I could go back to an older tradition than Amos—to Nathan, for instance, who preached his sermons individually to the people most concerned. "I accuse you," he said to King David, "thou art the man!"

But instead of that I will stay with the literary prophets: with those, that is to say, whose sermons we have at some length because contemporaries reduced them to writing. I would like to speak of several of them but there is time only for one more: for the last and greatest: Jeremiah.

He lived in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., being born about 650. His entire concern was with national and international affairs, and his thesis was that his country, Judah, was being led to destruction by small-minded men who could not see the realities of their situation, and that at the same time it was being undermined by evils it would not remedy and deficiencies it would not correct. If we had to characterize Jeremiah in a sentence, we could call him a moral realist. Far more than those he criticized—the men of affairs who were misguiding the state—he recognized reali-

ties and insisted upon dealing with them exactly as they were. He was disdainful of shallow optimism and impatient of bunglers. He did not believe that Judah could muddle through. At the same time, he was utterly convinced that survival depended upon merit: an unrighteous nation not only *could* not but *should* not survive. Evil would weaken it, divert it from a prudent course of action, distract it from the business in hand, and bring about its ruin from within. It would then be easy to invade it from without. Both morally and politically, this was merely cause and effect.

Besides being a realist, however, and an ardent reformer, Jeremiah was a mystic and a poet, and this, no doubt, was what originally the people liked about him. They wished he would stop talking about Egypt and discuss the sweetness of the inner life.

But Egypt was what was bothering him. An alliance with Egypt would mean unlimited war and Egypt was too decadent to win. What was necessary, said Jeremiah, was an arrangement with the Babylonians. Judah could not survive in isolation; nor could it escape destruction if it committed itself to the wrong theater of war, or gave its backing to armies that were sure to be defeated. This meant that Pharoah's pleas must be resisted. The alliance to be strengthened was with the Babylonians, who had repelled the barbarians and were sub-

duing the aggressive Assyrians. Babylon was the country with the highest civilization, the most enlightened aims, and was nearest akin to Judah's national aspirations.

For advising this, Jeremiah was accused of treason and forced to go into hiding. The same thing would probably have happened to him in any case, because of his condemnation of profiteering and corrupt politics, and of the hypocrisy of those who pretended to support reform and still retained the same old evils.

At any rate, as the international tensions heightened, Judah was swept by a wave of hysteria, and in a sort of panic committed itself to go to war on the side of the Egyptians. This resulted in complete disaster and in 586 B.C. the Babylonians—rather reluctantly—destroyed Jerusalem.

During this entire period, Jeremiah was applying religion to the national and international situation. His conviction was that this was the business of religion. "Ah, no!" said the priests of the Temple at Jerusalem. "Let us leave that alone! We shall be saved because we are the chosen people, the favored of the Lord, a nation inviolate that cannot be invaded." "That," said Jeremiah, "is nothing but sheer superstition! It is not religion at all. Religion is realism. And its warning is that your policy must make sense; that is what you were given brains for. Moreover, not your Temple at Jerusalem but your national righteousness,

the cleanliness, the uprightness, the vision of the people is what you have to turn to for salvation. And these things simply do not exist. Because the land is burdened with evil and sown with dissension born of unrighteousness the people will not be strong enough, not courageous enough, and their resolve will be too feeble. And so your Temple of Jerusalem will be destroyed. Your sins and your follies make it certain. Only if you cleanse your hearts—and at the same time clear your heads—is there any chance for you."

"Oh," but the leaders said—even some of the better ones—"we have the law, the code of Deuteronomy. Righteousness is written into our Constitution." "It will do you no good," said Jeremiah. "The law of God must be written in men's hearts. The will to do right must be a living thing, a daily, hourly motivation. Your tablets of stone will not protect you."

"But God is ready," he continued, "to make a new covenant with you, to breathe the spirit of his law into mind and conscience and to write it in your hearts. If you accept this, you can still be saved."

That was the preaching of Jeremiah. And that is the kind of religion you find in the Bible. You will discover that Jesus himself instead of referring to corruption in general principles, actually *cleansed* the Temple—or attempted to; and that he predicted its destruction, much as Jeremiah did.

In public affairs and in private, the religion of the Bible is explicit religion, demanding righteousness, justice, reasonableness; yes, and sympathy, humanity and brotherliness—all spelled out in the context of specific situations.

There are other things in the Bible, of course: folk-lore, hymns, proverbs, romances, love-songs, drama—almost every kind of literature there is. But if it is religion we are after: if we take the Bible's own injunction on priorities, if we put first things first, then what I have given you is typical and representative.

There is nothing we can find—nothing in our modern situation—to which the Bible is not pertinent. But are we sure that we mean it, sure that we know what we are asking, when we say, "Preach us the religion that is in the Bible"? It is so much more drastic—Bible religion—than even the strongest sermons that wander away from it. Do we really want the forthrightness of Amos? The explicitness of Jeremiah? The directness of Jesus? All of whom intended their words to be taken seriously, and immediately applied?

I hope we *do* want these things—or may come to want them. To arrive at that, however, we must face the truth. There is no easy way in religion. No way of keeping it separated off from life. Religion is not a thing to be applied to a hypothetical situation. It must be applied to

actual situations. Otherwise, it is a sham—as we can see at once by noticing its applications in the Bible.

I have called this sermon, "The Danger of Preaching From the Bible." Let me say in closing, in a single sentence, what that danger is: it is the danger of discovering that religion must be practiced, and that the time to practice it is always now. That, as we shall all admit, is a very great danger indeed. What would happen if we did what Amos did—here where we live and in this time in which we live? Or if we took religion into politics, following the example of Jeremiah? What would happen—one almost hesitates to put the question—if we really listened to Jesus? If we applied what he said, item by item, to what we read in tomorrow's newspaper? Or if we even applied it to what we read in our hearts?

Prayer: O God, who hast not left thyself without witness, when other voices cease to speak, teach us to listen to the voice in our own hearts. Amen.